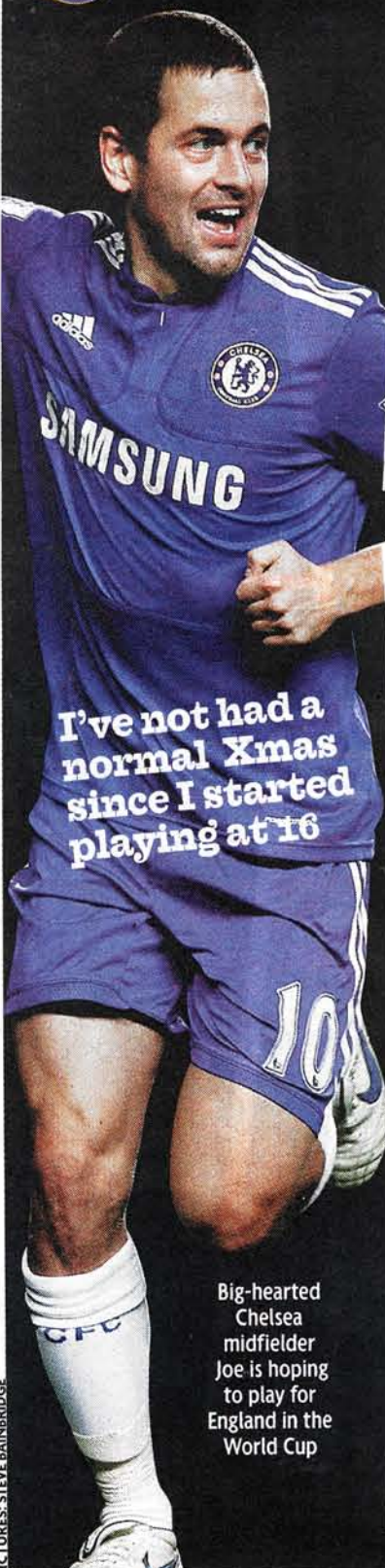


ENGLAND STAR JOE COLE PLAYS SANTA FOR KIDS' HOSPICE



I've not had a normal Xmas since I started playing at 16

Big-hearted Chelsea midfielder Joe is hoping to play for England in the World Cup



Senior nurse Neil takes a present for Megan, four, from Joe



Gifts all round... Joe with children and their parents at the hospice



Joe at the bedside of sick Josh, 13, and his brother Jordan, 16



It's hard to see children this ill but it makes me so grateful for my life

Soccer Santa... Joe brings joy to sick little Theo, 19 months, his brother Seb, seven, and Alex, four

JOE Cole has the world at his feet – a glittering career, gorgeous model wife, baby daughter on the way and millions in the bank.

So you'd expect the Premiership star's Christmas would be all about splashing his cash and having loads of self-indulgent fun.

But the big-hearted Chelsea and England player – who is back playing football after a nine-month knee injury – is dedicating his time to making dreams come true for a special group of children.

For nine years Joe, 28, has acted as Father Christmas for the seriously ill youngsters at London's Richard House Children's Hospice – buying them all presents and turning up to hand them out. "Before Christmas I call the hospice and ask them what the kids would like," he says.

"There can be up to eight youngsters in the residential unit with more using the other hospice facilities. Some don't know who I am as they are very young. It's mainly their brothers and sisters

EXCLUSIVE
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and families who know me. But even if they don't know me we still have a great time together."

The care the children and young adults receive throughout the year from Richard House helps them live their life to the full – but Joe's visits bring a special magic.

As Joe points out, it's not just the sick children who need festive cheer. "Their brothers and sisters can suffer too," he says. "Their mums and dads have to dedicate their lives to the sick child in the family – and the other kids sometimes miss out. They're often the bravest ones."

"That's where the hospice helps. The mums and dads know their child is well cared for at Richard House and that gives them the chance to spend some time with the other kids in the

family." Joe – whose I'm A Celebrity star wife Carly, 25, is due to give birth to their first child in March – first visited Richard House when he was a 17-year-old at West Ham. And he has never forgotten that moment.

"It was hard at first – as a 17-year-old lad you don't think about those things, about children being really sick and dying. But it opened my eyes," he says.

"I've always been quite a thoughtful guy and what I saw that first day really touched me. It made me realise how much I have to be grateful for. It would have been easy to be selfish in my position but Richard House made sure I didn't go down that road."

He decided, there and then, to dedicate himself to the hospice. "Even as a young footballer you're inundated with requests to do things for charity, but you can't do them all."

"I said to myself I'd get something that's close to me, something where I

know I can help, and where the people there are doing a great job. I've been supporting Richard House ever since.

"It's a really special place. I know when people hear the word hospice they cringe, but it is a place for these kids to be kids."

"They've got the best facilities to help them with their conditions. The staff make life as comfortable as they can for the kids. There's a lot of fun to be had there."

During the visit last Tuesday, Joe handed presents to 19-month old Theo and chatted about football to Theo's brothers Seb, seven, and Alex, four – who told Joe they were both West Ham supporters.

He'd bought a cuddly dog for delighted Sirma, 15, and a piano keyboard and cuddly toys for the other children.

Even when he found 13-year-old Josh was fast asleep, Joe made sure he collected a card the lad had left for him and spent time talking to his brother, Jordan, 16.

Fitness instructor Carly said she couldn't feel more proud of her husband. "The charity means a lot to him and he really enjoys spending time with the



Joe & Carly are having a baby in spring

children and families there, especially at this time of year. "Joe is just pleased that he can do his bit and that Richard House is such a warm, loving and caring place for them when they need it the most."

Joe, of course, has never been busier. Since his return to playing in September, he has been determined to regain top form and represent England at the World Cup.

Either way, next year will be an exciting one for the Cole family. Joe and pregnant Carly – who married this year after a seven-year romance – are planning for the arrival of their daughter. Joe says: "It was a great moment when I saw the scan and I'm very excited to be a dad. I'm a lucky man."

But they were apart for most of Christmas Day as Joe was in training for yesterday's 0-0 Boxing Day match against Birmingham.

"I went training Christmas morning, had lunch for a few hours and then went to a hotel," he said.

"There wasn't any alcohol and I couldn't have too much Christmas pudding because I was running round. I've not

had a normal Christmas since I was 16. I came out of school and went straight into the first team at West Ham."

But this year he bought all the presents – again. "I did all the Christmas shopping for the whole family this year," he said.

"Carly's got a brother and sister, I've got a brother and sister, a nanny and granddad, parents, uncles and aunts and hundreds of cousins."

"I did it all last year because Carly was in the jungle for I'm A Celebrity. Everyone was happy – I don't know if they were just being kind to me – but I got the job again this year."

Last Christmas Joe bought Carly a handbag and a bracelet. "Nothing overly extravagant," he says. "It's hard to buy for Carly because she's got everything she needs, but you can always get away with a handbag or a bit of jewellery for the ladies. You've got to get it right though."

"You've got to know what's in fashion. For me walking into a big shop like

Harrods can be quite imposing because there's so much to choose from."

Joe's acutely aware that not everyone is lucky enough to be able to shop and not worry about the bill. "You have to remember the state of the country, a lot of people are struggling out there."

"There's a lot of people who have lost their jobs and Christmas is tough for them."

"We have to remember how lucky we are to be able to get these things."

And he was determined to make December 25 special for the children at Richard House.

He said: "What I do it is only a small thing. The real heroes are the parents, kids and staff. The people there are unbelievable, the work they do with the kids. Some of them really need a lot of help and to do that every day is really dedicated."

● RICHARD House provides care and respite to families and children with life-limited, life-threatening and complex health care conditions. To find out more or make a donation go to www.richardhouse.org.uk, 020 7511 0222.

I have a great time with the kids.. it's a wonderful place

I loved seeing a scan of our baby. I'm a lucky man